

Better to Give Than Receive?

Confucius reviewed by Pevans

The latest board game from Surprised Stare Games, *Confucius* is still fascinating me. The game is set in China during the Ming dynasty. The players represent families trying to better themselves within the Confucian system espoused by the Imperial government and court. In game terms this means within the three Ministries of the government, in sea expeditions to explore the world and military expeditions to expand the empire. The key to success is the network of obligations between players established by giving gifts. While this is stated in the rules, you only realise just how important this is when you play the game.



To start with, what's in the hefty box? The solidly mounted board shows various areas that are important to the game. In the centre of the board (and the game) are the three Ministries: of Finance (Hubu), the Army (Bingbu) and Public Works (Gongbu). Each has spaces for tiles representing officials and the victory points for becoming Minister and Secretary. Below the Ministries are spaces for Invasions and Explorations. The former is where armies are placed, along with the military invasions they may be sent on (to score victory points). The latter holds constructed ships and shows expeditions to foreign parts (also worth points). At the top of the board are the space for the Imperial Examinations, a table of the actions available to players and, of course, a victory point track.

Each player has a set of wooden pieces in their colour: army pawns, action cubes and hexagonal marker 'barrels'. They also have a set of gifts (cards) in their colour. Ships are neutral pieces. Money is provided by a deck of cards. Each card shows 1, 2 or 3 coins and 3, 2 or 1 'licences' – each card having four things on it. A smaller set of cards are 'Emperor's Rewards', extra actions that players may earn. There are thick cardboard tiles for the officials who staff the Ministries, some of which are candidates for examination. And cardboard chits for some victory points and the sections of the Great Wall that mark the end of the rounds. There is also an extensive, double-sided player aid for each player. This shows the sequence of play and describes all the actions available to players.

Each round, players have 3-5 actions, depending on how many gifts they have given and received. This is a small range, but an extra action makes a significant difference. Hence, one of the things to do in the first round is to make sure you get four actions next round. You do this by giving (or getting) a gift – and everybody

starts the game with one gift (the least valuable) available. Gaining the fifth action requires at least three gifts given/received, so it's not going to happen in the first round. However, I strongly recommend getting to that position.

Players start the round by taking as many cubes as they have actions. However, before they take any actions, one player gets to be Chief Minister. At the start of the game, this is decided at random. After that, the retiring Minister gives the privilege to another player. The new Minister puts one of their cubes aside – they will get the very last action of the round. The round starts, then, with the player to the left of the Chief Minister. Unless there are tactical reasons for making a specific player Chief Minister, the privilege tends to pass to the right, so that the ex-Minister gets the first action of the round.

Players take one action each, placing a cube to show which action (or playing an Emperor's Reward card), until everybody's taken all their actions – ending with the First Minister's final action. You can take the same action more than once – it just needs two cubes if you've already taken the action. Some of the actions are paired, in which case you need two cubes to take either action if you've already taken either action. This, of course, is where the meat of the game is: deciding what actions to take, in what order, and dealing with the consequences of other players' actions.

Probably the most significant action is to bribe a Ministry official. The Ministries provide a significant number of victory points and having the most officials is the way to get them. The bribery cost is shown on each tile and players place a marker, lying down, to show their control. The officials are dished out at random, so it's just luck where the cheap ones end up. An obvious early move is to snap up a cheap official. Once you have an official in a Ministry, you get a discount. The Ministry of Finance gives a discount on bribing other officials (so that's always my priority), the Army Ministry makes licensing Armies cheaper and you get cheaper junks with an official in Public Works.

Paired with Bribing an Official is the action of Securing one. This involves paying the bribe amount again and then standing your marker on its end. There are a couple of ways of replacing or taking over an official that someone else has bribed, but not a secured official. In the early stages of the game, this is not a threat, as empty spaces in the Ministries have to be filled first. However, as the game moves towards a conclusion, securing an official – particularly one in a strategic position – becomes more attractive.

The other paired actions involve armies and junks. Recruiting an army (which costs licences, not cash) is paired with Invading a Foreign Land (for cash). The former means making one of your armies available, the latter places the army on one of the invasion tiles. This will earn victory points (and sometimes an Emperor's Reward card) if the invasion succeeds – that is, if the invasion tile is filled with armies. There are some tactical options here. One player is unlikely to be able to carry out an invasion on their own. However, once one player is committed, will others help



them score points? It may be worth taking the smaller number of victory points to encourage someone else to join you...

Buying junks costs cash, but sending some on a voyage costs licences. Five junks will complete a voyage to one of the available destinations. Every completed voyage earns an Emperor's Reward card. However, only the first to each destination gets victory points. The cards can be very useful as each provides an additional action. What's more, many of these actions are not generally available, such as bribing someone's (unsecured) official away from them.

The second way of gaining officials in a Ministry is putting a candidate through the Imperial Examinations. One action allows a player to nominate a student, placing a marker on one of the exam spaces. The exam takes place at the end of the round if

both student places are filled – or if someone has taken the action to force an exam. The exam involves all players ‘coaching’ one or other student by paying money: the best-coached student passes the exam. The winner places the candidate tile as an official in a Ministry – the other way of replacing an unsecured official – and secures it with their marker.

I’ve mentioned giving gifts: there is an action to do this. There is also an action to buy a gift, which involves spending the amount of money shown on the card to make this available to give to someone else. Finally, there are income actions: Tax income gets you two cards. Commercial income gets you cards according to how much money you spend. As money and licences are needed every round, players need to make sure they get some income (think of it like food in Agricola). Of course, this eats into the actions available to you, which is one reason it’s so useful to have more than three actions in a round.

The game will always end after nine rounds (the Great Wall is complete!), though it will generally end earlier than this. Either because all the candidate officials have been placed or, more usually, because all three Ministries have been resolved. A Ministry is resolved at the end of the round in which all its officials have been bribed. There is a voting system that has the player with the fewest (or lowliest) officials backing one of the other factions (players) until only two are left. The player with the most officials becomes Minister, the other becomes Secretary and they get victory points for this.

My experience is that most victory points come from the Ministries (4-8 for Minister/Secretary), although a lot can be accumulated from invasions as well (2-5 per army). Fewer points are available from exploration (2-4), but voyages are a very useful way of gaining Emperor’s Reward cards. There are a few bonus points available at the end of the game, but these aren’t usually significant. The player with the most points wins, of course.

Phew! That’s quite a lot of description as the mechanics of *Confucius* are complex. What I’ve described is a fairly standard action point game where players have lots of choice about what action to take and in what order. There is a premium on planning what you’re going to do in a round – and round on round. Players are clearly focussed on the few ways to get victory points, but they have lots of options as to how they get there.

However, what I haven’t described are the obligations imposed by gifts and these add a whole new dimension to the game. Essentially, players must support other players who’ve given them a gift – the most valuable gift taking precedence. In most cases, this support cancels out the gift. Gifts can also be cancelled by transferring a Ministerial official to another player or by giving a higher value gift. This leads to the tactical ploy of keeping a high value gift ready to counter another player.

Gifts define who players must support in Imperial Examinations – this can even mean supporting a candidate against your own! When resolving a Ministry, players

must support those who've given them gifts. Crucially, though, a gift can stop another player bribing more officials in a Ministry in opposition to you. All of this means that players not only have to plan their actions, they have to plan for who owes obligations to whom. In practice, this is not difficult, but it may take a game or two to get your head round this. It is important to do so as this really is the key to the game. It's not simply a matter of bribing officials in a Ministry, but of making sure you get support from others when the Ministry is resolved. And this applies through the game.

There is one further use for gifts: to petition the Emperor. This action allows players to present a gift to the Emperor. What they can get for this depends on the value of the gift, but it's something that would otherwise be outside the rules. Like swapping over two armies or taking control of another player's official. This is a very powerful addition to the game and gives the players yet another thing to think about—hence it is suggested for advanced play only.

As I said at the beginning, *Confucius* is a fascinating game. The whole gift-giving mechanism adds another layer to the use-actions-to-do-things-to-get-victory-points game. However, the game remains predictable. You can see what obligations exist and what gifts players have available to create more or cancel obligations. Or what they could do by presenting a gift to the Emperor. There is a lot to think about and success comes from out-manoeuvring your opponents. Given all the factors involved, this is difficult to pull off. This makes victory all the sweeter.

Confucius was designed by Alan Paull and is published by Surprised Stare Games. It is a strategy board game for 3-5 players, aged 12+, and takes about 2 hours to play. *Confucius* gets 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

This review was first published in *To Win Just Once* 97 (July/August 2009).

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